

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 480

CS 213 397

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TITLE Writing a Core Curriculum: Classic Books and Student Compositions.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Core Curriculum; Critical Reading; Curriculum Development; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Politics of Education; *Rhetoric; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS Bloom (Allan); *Great Books Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed a great upsurge in interest in a core curriculum. However, there has been some disagreement as to what should be included or how it should be defined. Allan Bloom has argued most strongly that the "Great Books" should form the basis of the core curriculum. Not only is the term itself ambiguous, but the question arises as to how these Great Books are to be taught. Objectives for such a course should be geared toward the goal of producing literate individuals capable of reading works of significance independently, and desiring to do so. Clearly, such goals are not related to any particular texts. Instructors should be wary of what has been called the "rhetoric of liberal culture," a rhetoric which is elitist and aristocratic. Even if they do not sympathize with the advocates of the Great Books approach, however, teachers can admire their sincere search for coherence in the curriculum. Instead of having faith in the power of a certain set of books, attention should be focused on the rhetorical powers of students, the so-called "critical literacy." The return of rhetoric from exile would do much to redress many of the problems now facing the humanities. Assigning rhetoric a central role in the definition of the core curriculum has enormous implications. Writing becomes the very substance of liberal education, teachers are freed from the tyranny of coverage, and the results of the educational experience can be validly assessed. (HB)

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Writing a Core Curriculum: Classic Books and Student Compositions

Recent years have seen a great upsurge in interest in a core curriculum. Certainly, the phenomenal success of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* was one impetus behind this movement. This ringing jeremiad, subtitled "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students" rocketed to the top of the bestseller lists in 1987. In 1988 and 1989, national conferences were convened at the University of North Texas to discuss the core curriculum concept. In the fall of 1989 Lynne Cheney, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, released a report entitled *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*. In 1990, the American Association for the Advancement of Core Curriculum was formed. Although the core curriculum concept is not new—for more than 70 years all Columbia students have been required to take Contemporary Civilization in the West—there is clearly a rising tide of interest in core curricula.

Even among the advocates of core curriculum, there is some difference of opinion as to its definition. It is generally seen as an alternative to general education requirements. That is, students take prescribed courses instead of choosing among various offerings in humanities, science, and social science. Core curriculum advocates frequently term general education programs "cafeteria-style" education. The assumption is that students choosing from

various required categories will miss the essential nutrients of a liberal education. For instance, in *50 Hours*, Cheney notes that a 1988-89 NEH survey revealed that students can graduate from "38 percent [of the nation's colleges and universities] without ever taking a course in history." The report does not reveal how many students actually exercise this option. In any case, a core curriculum requires all students to complete some common courses that are considered foundational to their learning.

But from here on, the definition becomes trickier. Many core curriculum programs only require one or two courses of all entering students, typically an introductory course in humanities or Western civilization. Even the NEH recommendation for 50 hours allows for some options in languages and in non-Western civilizations. In theory, all students in the university would be required to take specific introductory courses in math, science, and social science as they are in the humanities. However, such courses are likely to meet more resistance than a broad humanities course. In reality, most professors think the introductory courses in their field are broad enough. For instance, I assume that many sociology professors would rather teach a general course in sociology than a "one-year course that explores ways in which the social sciences have been used to explain political, economic, and social life, as well as the experience of individuals, in the last 200 years" as stated in *50 Hours* (17). At the very least, most professors in the sciences insist that majors be exempted from what they perceive to be "watered down" courses.

If the core curriculum is not a prescribed course of study in all the major disciplines for all entering students, then how is it different from current general education requirements, or at best, from somewhat more restricted general education requirements? The answer to that question is

provided succinctly by Bloom. After discussing various approaches to the core curriculum, Bloom concludes: "Of course, the only serious solution is the one that is almost universally rejected: the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts" (344). Bloom clearly asserts the supremacy of the humanities over the other major divisions in the university—natural science and social science. "The humanities," he writes, "are the specialty that now exclusively possesses the books that are not specialized, that insist upon asking the questions about the whole that are excluded from the rest of the university" (372).

I was not surprised, then, when attending the 1990 Core Across the Curriculum Conference in Denver to hear the keynote speaker proclaim that the Great Books are the "core of the core curriculum." Since the Great Books controversy has been stewing for most of this century, I will not take time to rehearse all the arguments for and against such an approach. Traditionally, these arguments have been conducted on theoretical or philosophical grounds. What are the Great Books? Are they distinguished by moral or literary excellence? Are the works of antiquity superior to modern letters? Is an understanding of the classical tradition prerequisite to a full appreciation of modern literature? And more recently, we have begun to question whether any book can be called "great" that fails to recognize the fundamental human rights of whole classes of people.

But even if one possesses the hubris to proclaim you know exactly what it is that every American absolutely ought to know, the question still remains how such books ought to be taught, or even if they can be taught. I read, for instance, that according to a syllabus for Humanities 201 at Piedmont Virginia Community College that students will have read the *Odyssey*, Books

I-XIII, and Books IX-XXIV; have read selections from various Greek lyric poets, have read *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*; have had a discussion of Greek vase painting and made a trip to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; and have written a paper on the *Odyssey*— and all by the week of September 20. Call me an academic wimp, but it is a pace that makes me shudder. Of course, if the only purpose of such a course is that students have some nodding acquaintance some guy named Homer who wrote about some guy named Odysseus who stabbed some weird creature in the eye, then three weeks may be too long. But my objectives in the course would include at least the following:

1. Some students would need to be reassured that they could, indeed, pass the course. After a look at the required reading in such a course, many students might already be assuming they are not "college material."
2. Many students would need to find some way to connect to a time and place that probably seem impossibly remote from their own experiences. Making such connections can be a time-consuming process, but it is crucial to learning.
3. Students would need to, in fact, read the works and not rely on *Cliff Notes* or on my own lectures as a substitute for that reading. I would, therefore, need to assess this reading through class discussion, journal writing, and other means. I would not consider a test of objective knowledge to be a true indication that students have been able to understand and respond to the texts.

4. I would want students to have some appreciation for the conditions under which this text was written. In the case of the *Odyssey*, to know something of Greek culture, to understand its customs, ethics, laws, and ideals. I would want them, furthermore, to see the Greek culture as a critique of our own; and our culture as a critique of theirs.
5. I would want them to understand and gain confidence in their powers of interpretation and analysis. I would want them neither to deify the author as a "great writer" simply because he appears in an anthology or because I have chosen to study him in this course of study, nor simply to dismiss him as "someone people in English get all shook up about."

I recognize these are immodest goals. And I understand that they would not all be attainable for all students. But I would also submit that to pursue anything less than these goals is to undermine the purpose of our instruction—to produce literate individuals, capable of independently reading works of significance, and desiring to do so.

Clearly the goals I describe for such a course are not related to any particular texts. They could be as easily pursued with Alice Walker as with Homer, with Robert Pirsig as Plato. In the final analysis, the question is not so much *who* is studied, but how they are studied.

Of course, such an approach is sure to be attacked as educationally unsound, intellectually weak, and morally bankrupt. But I think such an approach recognizes the reality of education. As Bloom himself notes, the

Great Books Approach tends to make books the ends of an education rather than the means. We need to stop thinking of books as viaducts irrigating the barren souls of our students and start seeing them as markets where the worth and meaning of ideas is negotiated. Those who espouse the Great Books philosophy are able to reduce the rhetorical triangle to the head of a pin. Instead of interactions between teacher and student, reader and text, we have the magical power of books themselves. Bloom exuberantly declares, "Wherever the Great Books make up a central part of the curriculum, the students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling, getting something from the university they cannot get elsewhere" (344). I could as easily declare that wherever the Great Books make up a central part of the curriculum, students are bored silly and confused, feel they are doing something dull and meaningless, and wonder why they are having to endure such work as a part of their university education. Although a certain kind of student, perhaps the kind of student more likely to be found at the University of Chicago, may be drawn to Great Books, such students are not representative of the general college population.

Bloom is the embodiment of what James Berlin has described as the rhetoric of liberal culture. This rhetoric is self-consciously elitist and aristocratic and is generally associated with those colleges with highly-selective enrollments. An early proponent of this view, Charles G. Osgood of Princeton recommended the abolition of freshman composition because it did not address the real needs of the student. Osgood advocated that the study of literature be substituted for the freshman course in order to attend to the deeper problems of the students, which were not "visible correctness and propriety," but the need to become "more sensitive, more observant, more just, more consistent, more spiritual" (qtd. in Berlin 43-44).

Although many composition teachers would repudiate the aristocratic presumptions of liberal culture, David R. Russell has noted that many teachers continue to cling to Romantic notions of the ways in which students learn to write. He argues that subjective theories of rhetoric, that writing is learned through "inspiration, or therapy, or exposure to liberal culture" (145) are still endemic in academia, and he pleads for a broader conception of the purposes of freshman composition:

In this view composition courses serve to include students in the academic community, as do other elementary courses, not to exclude them during a probationary or purgatorial period until they are worthy of membership. Freshman composition (or rhetoric) is taught as a liberal art in a broader (and earlier) sense of the term, as part of the trivium, the means of discovering and sharing knowledge in all human endeavors—not merely as liberal culture, the literary province of a social elite. (145)

Given the distaste for composition teaching demonstrated by the advocates of liberal culture, it is not surprising that Bloom considers teaching composition a lost cause engaged in by a benighted proletariat.

Teachers of writing in state universities, among the noblest and most despised laborers in the academy, have told me that they cannot teach writing to students who do not read, and that it is practically impossible to get them to read, let alone like it. (65)

Although Bloom suggests that teaching writing is a noble profession, he clearly sees it as ancillary to the real purposes of education. In the following sentences, he bemoans high school teachers who are "products of the sixties and reflecting the pallor of university-level humanities" (65). He longs for the "old teachers who loved Shakespeare or Austen or Donne, and whose only reward for teaching was the perpetuation of their taste" (65).

Given the skepticism of the advocates of liberal culture about the teaching of writing, it will come as no surprise that Lynne Cheney's *50 Hours* recommends the elimination of freshman composition from the core. Writing, unlike science or history, is assumed to be a skill that should have been mastered before arriving at the university. Students without these skills are curtly remanded to "remedial courses" (13). Of course, students will be expected "to write papers of varying length in every course" and will find that the "practice of organizing ideas and presenting them coherently [to be] a useful tool for learning in all subjects" (13). Furthermore, they will find that "clear and graceful expression is universally valuable, not merely an arbitrary preoccupation of English departments" (13). Although these statements seem to be reinforcing "writing across the curriculum programs" and "writing to learn" approaches, the assumptions are that writing can only be practiced, not taught, and that writing is the skill of graceful expression, unrelated to the making of meaning.

Although I am clearly not in sympathy with the Great Books approach advocated by Bloom and institutionalized by Cheney, I do appreciate their search for coherence in the undergraduate curriculum. If that coherence does not come from Great Books, where can we look for it?

My suggestion is that instead of placing our faith in the power of a certain set of books to restore coherence to education, we focus our attention

instead on the rhetorical powers of our students, or what is now sometimes referred to as critical literacy. Bruce Kimball makes this point well when he contrasts the tradition of the "orators" with that of the "philosophers." As he notes, the "orators," (i.e., adherents to the rhetorical tradition) are not seeking to abandon the "great texts," but they do not naively trust in the texts alone to rescue liberal education. "Their point is not that truth lies explicitly in the texts, but rather than it emerges through the disciplined effort to understand and express the meaning of these texts" (238). And I believe that this point is echoed in the voices of rhetorical theorists like Kathleen Welch and Susan Jarratt in their call to re-examine the Sophistic tradition, a sophistic tradition that refuses to separate intellectual issues from social responsibility.

In "Restoring the Humanities: Returning Rhetoric from Exile," James Kinneavy offers an alternative to the Bloom "Great Books" approach to vivifying humanities education. Kinneavy charges that "possibly the single most telling reason for the decline of the humanities in the twentieth century has been the alienation of rhetoric from the humanities" (19-20). To lose rhetoric is to lose the connection between the humanities and public life. Kinneavy notes that it is generally conceded that Isocrates is the father of the humanities for "Isocrates made it quite clear that the instrument for persuading the city assembly to adopt laws was the power of persuasion by speech—in a word, rhetoric. Rhetoric was thus the basis of all culture and civilization" (21).

The return of rhetoric from exile would do much in his view to redress many of the problems now facing the humanities. Unlike Bloom who assumes that the Great Books are inherently attractive, Kinneavy acknowledges that academic discourse, ancient or modern, often seems remote, difficult, and boring for contemporary students. Rhetoric, however,

engages students in the immediate concerns of their lives. This is particularly true for the underclass, those students of little interest to those espousing liberal culture. Citing reports of teachers working with minority populations in places like Laredo, Texas, Kinneavy writes:

Students who are untouched by the importance of writing expository themes or the vitality of reading great literature are often suddenly and vividly impressed with the relevance of religious and commercial persuasion to their lives. . . . Minority students see, sometimes more vividly than other students, the massive effects of commercial, racial, and political rhetoric on their lives.

Advertisements in grocery stores, which we often interpret as merely informative, strike them as coercive and unfair, for example (26).

Although Kinneavy addresses only education in the humanities, I think his argument extends to all fields of study. It seems to me particularly dangerous in a technocratic society such as our own to state, as Bloom does, that the humanities are "asking the questions about the whole that are excluded from the rest of the university" (372). We have for too long maintained the delusion that science is a value-free enterprise. The "questions about the whole" must include questions of origins, of the good life, of public policy, questions that in our time cannot be separated from the sciences.

A recognition of the central role of rhetoric in the definition of a core curriculum has enormous implications for core curriculum programs. First, it frees us from thinking of writing as a preliminary skill rather than as the

very substance of a liberal education, an education that does not end at graduation. I think those of us who regularly work with the writing of freshman students would readily acknowledge that the majority of our students do not come to us as sophisticated rhetoricians. Nor do those of us teaching juniors, seniors, or graduate students often feel that such students have mastered the art of rhetoric. In short, the advocates of liberal culture are condemning the vast majority of our students to educational hell. Only those making pronouncements from the lofty heights of endowed professorships are generally able to ignore their plaintive cries.

Secondly, by placing rhetoric at the core of the core curriculum we free ourselves from the tyranny of coverage. The greatest debates at our university have centered on which canonical texts will be included in the course. These debates are intensified in cross-disciplinary courses where faculty from history, political science, literature, art, drama, and a half dozen other specialties contend for their favorites. At one meeting last fall a historian complained vehemently that Tacitus had been omitted from the syllabus, and that we could hardly call our students educated if they did not know Tacitus. Once one has bought into the folly of the Great Books approach, the absurdities are endless.

Finally, I think a focus on rhetoric enables us to validly assess the results of the educational experience we offer our students. The public is already too inclined to judge the worth of an education by the score of our students on the academic version of Trivial Pursuit. Who was Tacitus? Who fought the War of the Roses? The focus of an education should not be on the accumulation of isolated data but on the ability of students to find the necessary resources, to read and evaluate various arguments, and to respond in lucid prose. Such an ability is no small attainment, and we should resist

any definition of a core curriculum that suggests that rhetoric is only a preliminary to the real business of education.

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